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## Poetic Education: Wordsworth, Yeats, Coleridge, and Shelley

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As they dramatize, implicitly or explicitly, the education involved in being a poet, Romantic poets meditate on what it is to know and to be free. Their meditations dwell in the light and shade cast by Schiller's proposition in letter XV of *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*: "man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and *he is only completely a man when he plays*." Play may be more apparent as a principle of poetic self-discovery in Coleridge and Shelley than in Wordsworth, and yet Wordsworth, too, insists upon the value of "idleness" (16) in a poem such as "Lines. Written at a Small Distance from My House ..." (Gill ed.). All three poets exalt serious play as they recognize and react against the burden of often internalized cultural demands.

Three quotations might serve as epigraphs for this essay's emphases and approach. The first comes from Helen Vendler's *Poets Thinking*, in which she suggests an ideal of how a poem can educate and in what its education consists: "Yes, material existence always exhibits a decline in age; but the choreographed line of developing selfhood may go up or down, across and over, because it is essentially a virtual line of psychological and aesthetic and intellectual self-creation rather than a line of physical event" (106), a "line" which, as she also notes, permits of no easy triumphalism in a poem alert, as Yeats's "Among School Children" (discussed below) is, to "the shriek of birth and the heartbreak of age" (108). The "choreographed line" traced by "self-

creation” scores its path through the heart of Romantic poetry. Often it finds expression in a manner that is glossed and evoked by Coleridge when, in a letter of 1803, he comments to Southey: “I almost think, that Ideas *never* recall Ideas ... any more than Leaves in a forest create each other’s motion – The Breeze it is that runs thro’ them / it is the Soul, the state of Feeling” (Griggs, II: 961). A “Breeze ... runs thro’” these comments, a syllabic and rhythmical susurrus that rises from its imagining of a force more deeply interfused. A poet’s aesthetic education shows to the degree that he or she can set going an artistic equivalent to that breeze. Yet to do so requires ethical resilience of a kind as well as art, as the essay’s third preliminary quotation, from Shelley, suggests. Building on a central Wordsworthian catastrophic insight, namely, the vision of the adult world as a prison-house, the younger poet, in *On Life*, describes the deleterious power of “the misuse of words and signs”: “Our whole life is thus an education of error” (Leader and O’Neill eds. 635).

Wordsworth’s “Intimations” Ode challenges the idea of teaching children anything. After all, it is they who, on his notion of pre-existent Platonism, are more in touch with truth than adults can ever be. “*Mental bombast*” (Halmi ed. 532) is the label Coleridge attaches to the lines beginning “Thou best Philosopher ...” (Gill ed. 110ff), demolishing the apostrophic structure reared by Wordsworth: “In what sense is a child of that age a *philosopher*?” asks Coleridge. “In what sense does he *read* ‘the eternal deep?’ In what sense is he declared to be ‘*for ever haunted*’ by the Supreme Being? or so inspired as to deserve the splendid titles of a *mighty prophet*, a *blessed seer*? By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by *any* form or modification of consciousness? ... Children at this age give us no such information of themselves” (Halmi ed. 534; italics in original). This mocking tirade is necessary, not

because it is right, but because its Yvor Winters-like mockery shocks the reader into realizing how extraordinary Wordsworth's assertions are. In fact, the passage in the Ode carries off its "*mental bombast*" with lacerating elegiac energy: "Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind, / That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep, / Haunted for ever by the eternal mind, -- / Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! / On whom those truths do rest, / Which we are toiling all our lives to find" (110-16). As "toiling" brings out, there is, in the poetry, a post-lapsarian despair that underpins and makes convincingly possible the flight into quasi-Metaphysical conceit. The writing has a near-fantastical, yet solemn intensity, a pushing to extremes in order to make its passionate if nearly self-defeating point. It is, after all, only the adult who could express in poetic language such a view about the child.

Wordsworth uses the foundational phrase "the mind's foundations" in a passage describing the Pedlar's education:

..... he repaired  
 To his Step-father's School, that stood alone,  
 Sole Building on a mountain's dreary edge,  
 Far from the sight of City spire, or sound  
 Of Minster clock! From that bleak Tenement  
 He, many an evening to his distant home  
 In solitude returning, saw the Hills  
 Grow larger in the darkness, all alone  
 Beheld the stars come out above his head,

And travelled through the wood, with no one near  
 To whom he might confess the things he saw.  
 So the foundations of his mind were laid.  
 In such communion, not from terror free,  
 While yet a Child, and long before his time,  
 Had he perceived the presence and the power  
 Of greatness; and deep feelings had impressed  
 Great objects on his mind, with portraiture  
 And colour so distinct, that on his mind  
 They lay like substances, and almost seemed  
 To haunt the bodily sense. He had received  
 (Vigorous in native genius as he was)  
 A precious gift; for, as he grew in years,  
 With these impressions would he still compare  
 All his remembrances, thoughts, shapes, and forms;  
 And, being still unsatisfied with aught  
 Of dimmer character, he thence attained  
 An active power to fasten images  
 Upon his brain; and on their pictured lines  
 Intensely brooded, even till they acquired  
 The liveliness of dreams....

(*The Excursion* I 137-66)

The lines coincide with the story told in *The Prelude* of a youthful figure, “Fostered  
 alike by beauty and by fear” (1805 I 306), of nurturing by an absent mother-figure

who is not wholly unterrifying (Whitman's old crone in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is a sweetly sinister descendant). In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth prefers third-person narrative to first-person recollection. He is telling the tale of one educated by nature to be a poet, but a poet "wanting the accomplishment of Verse" (84). Yet the Pedlar is among those "Poets that are sown / By Nature; Men endowed with highest gifts, / The vision and the faculty divine" (81-3). In the passage quoted above, Wordsworth separates a narrating consciousness from the experiences of the Boy: experiences that criss-cross with the composing poet's. The Pedlar is a relatively inarticulate twin of this poet, allowing Wordsworth to imagine, as seems a compulsion for him to imagine, what might be called a pre-verbal state, a poetic mind that has no need for words: a mind and a state that can only be known through words.

Wordsworth's paradoxical task is to use language to locate a state that is the other side of language, as he, for instance, recalls the boy's daily visits to a "School, that stood alone, / Sole Building on a mountain's dreary edge, / Far from the sight of City spire, or sound / Of Minster clock!." Details verge on the allegorical, as if to suggest the value of a schooling that transcends book-learning. The boy's learning works at a sensuous level, one beyond and below the conceptual. It derives from bracing nearness to the "mountain's dreary edge" (poised at the "edge" of the line) and concomitant remoteness from "the sight of City spire, or sound / Of Minster clock!" Wordsworth evokes a time that operates in a dimension different from that presided over by "Minster clock," one in which past recollection takes on the force of continually reiterated experience. The verse recreates what allowed it to come into being: "From that bleak Tenement / He, many an evening to his distant home / In solitude returning, saw the Hills / Grow larger in the darkness, all alone / Beheld the

stars come out above his head, / And travelled through the wood, with no one near / To whom he might confess the things he saw.” Sight is focused on what nature has to disclose, the hills “growing larger in the darkness.” They do not. They merely seem to expand as they engage the boy’s powers of apprehension. But Wordsworth gives sensory error the power of revelation, so that, with a forceful poetic logic, the apprehension of hills growing larger lays the ground for a further emboldened act of seeing. This act of seeing associates itself with the boy’s newly discovered feeling of subjective individuality, as he “all alone / Beheld the stars come out above his head.” This aloneness is different from “solitude.” It implies not just solitariness, but also the educative effects of discovering the self’s remarkable, vulnerable presence in an unknowable scheme of things. Yet if the scheme is unknowable, things make themselves through their very unknowableness. As “the stars come out above his head” passes into “And travelled through the wood,” the poetry moves from a glimpse of meaning into entrance into a “wood.” The unknowable declares itself to the reader through the mediating agency of the narrating poet. He intervenes on behalf of the experience’s untold, language-challenging nature.

Wordsworth does not underplay the education that a poet needs to gain from observation of and sympathy with others, especially of those “feelings” that are “Essential and eternal in the heart” (*Excursion* I 372, 373). Nor does he underestimate the significance of books. He speaks of people who are incipiently or even inherently poets as failing to fulfil their promise through “lack / Of culture and the inspiring aid of books” (*Excursion* I 86-7). Without his own knowledge of books, aspects of his account would have less alluring resonance. Yet books can only take the poet so far and are the worriedly hopeful source of “Knowledge not purchased

with the loss of power!” (*The Prelude* [1805] V 449). Wordsworth’s language brings out the shaping influence exercised by the elemental scene. “So the foundations of his mind were laid” expands the significance of the preceding passage, makes it exemplary, by the use of “So” and by a distribution of stresses that suggests a refusal to abide by strict conformity: the line scans (to this reader’s ear) with stresses on the first, fourth, eighth and tenth syllables. The foundations of the mind depend on “such communion, not from terror free.” Through Wordsworth’s rhythms and spare diction the reader learns to experience the co-dependence, in the passage, of sense and significance, outer and inner. In what follows Wordsworth traces the development of the boy’s mind, stressing the interplay of “Great objects” and “deep feelings,” deploying a syntax that makes the “deep feelings” the subject of the impression. In Jonathan Wordsworth’s words, “natural objects are stamped upon the mind” (*Borders of Vision* 178). The same critic draws a valuable distinction between Wordsworth’s understanding of “imagery” (“Sensible objects really existing and felt to exist”) and “imagination” (“objects ... as they appear to the mind of the poet”), and yet Wordsworth, in the passage above, blends and interfuses the two modes of perception (Wordsworth qtd in *Borders of Vision* 178). That process of interfusion is, in short, the substance and outcome of a poet’s education.

It is a capacity for such “deep feelings” that, in turn, generates “An active power to fasten images / Upon his brain” (*Excursion* I 163-4); “and on their pictured lines.” Wordsworth goes on to affirm, he “Intensely brooded, even till they acquired / The liveliness of dreams” (I 164-6). The passage seems concerned with mental, rather than material, life. Yet mental life is made up of “images” drawn from the material world, images that “on his mind ... lay like substances” (I 154-5). The blank verse is



a flexibly mimetic vehicle for the apprehension of such acquired substances, whether through the use of line endings enacting the way in which “deep feelings had impressed / Great objects on his mind,” where “impressed” stamps itself vigorously on the reader’s mind, or through muscular, onward-propelling clauses that often half-stop with a caesural break, before regathering self-generating momentum. “Feeling comes in aid / Of feeling” (*The Prelude* [1805] XI 326-7), as Wordsworth will say in a related passage. Incrementally supportive feeling is at work in *The Excursion*, too. The material world is recomposed in the boy’s mind until that world ceases simply to be an object. “Even in their fixed and steady lineaments,” Wordsworth writes of the Pedlar’s response to caves and crags, “He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind, / Expression ever varying!” (*Excursion* 1 178-80). Motion and force flow through rocks and stones and trees. Blank verse bends rigidity into a suppler thing, giving it a sinewy elasticity, as if to prime the reader for what the boy’s imagination will achieve.

The Pedlar’s education seems as fitted to what the reader learns of the growth of the poet’s mind in *The Prelude* as to his later role in *The Excursion*. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth makes the process sound even more open to mystery. He entangles abstract statement with recreated episode. The result is poetry that invites yet frustrates analysis, that questions the significance of even its own explanatory attempts. The poem may offer the “spots of time” as illustrative of moments in which human beings create their own brave, new, post-Kantian world, sensing that “the mind / Is lord and master, and that outward sense / Is but the obedient servant of her will” (*The Prelude*, 1805, XI. 258, 271-3). But the spots of time proper precede and outstrip the analysing that would keep pace with them, and complicate Wordsworth’s

moral. If by “the mind” is meant the faculty that allows comprehension, then neither of the stories that follow validates the general meaning attached to both. Enigma attaches to the “visionary dreariness” (*The Prelude*, 1805, XI. 311) experienced by the poet in the aftermath of and possible reaction against the experiences of disorientation in stumbling upon a place where “A Murderer had been hung in iron chains” (XI. 290). Enigma also pervades the bewildered, charged location of all that coheres in memory as powerful in the Waiting for the Horses passage.

These moments are still among the most arresting and haunting in English poetry because they refuse to obey any evident pattern of conceptualization. They educate the poet in the fact that the “mind of man” needs to confront greater mysteries than have been dreamt of in previous philosophies. Signposts such as “sublimity” or “the numinous” neutralize the shock of Wordsworth’s writing. Recollection confers barely graspable significance. Intimations of uniqueness embody themselves in a near-monosyllabic bareness: “The single sheep, and the one blasted tree” (*The Prelude* XI. 378) is a line that serves as an emblem of such writing. Like the line, the poetry verges on self-caricature yet avoids it through its regard, not just for irreducible singularity, but for the connection between that singularity and the poet’s obscurely evolving grasp of his destiny and vocation. At the same time, Wordsworth couches this evolving sense in collective terms: “So feeling comes in aid / Of feeling, and diversity of strength / Attends us, if but once we have been strong” (XI. 326-8). A poet’s education, so particular to Wordsworth, is available to “us” all. In the Ode, childhood is the time of “obstinate questionings” (144), a refusal to take on trust the validity “Of sense and outward things” (145), when truths “wake, / To perish never” (158-9), a form of words that entangles the imagination’s retrospective findings with

the very real possibility, held at bay by that last-ditch “never,” of their perishing. In *The Prelude* “feeling comes in aid / Of feeling” like reinforcements to a beleaguered garrison, confronted by the mind’s enemies, the subtlest of which, the poetry suggests, exist within its own quarters.

Wordsworth’s depiction of a poet’s education owes its power in part to his double view of the mind’s operation, a view at once anti- and post-Lockean. For him, the mind is not a tabula rasa on which experiences inscribe themselves. And yet, for him also, experiences do inscribe themselves on the mind. But they do so in ways that the mind’s default settings make possible. Those settings can never be analysed satisfactorily, the writing satisfyingly persuades the reader. They lie beyond discernment as subsequent lines in the *Prelude* passage under discussion go on to suggest: “Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth / Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see / In simple childhood something of the base / On which thy greatness stands; but this I feel, / That from thyself it is that thou must give, / Else never can receive” (XI. 329-34).

“I am lost, but see” might serve as Wordsworth’s motto here and elsewhere; he sees, in fact, precisely because he has the courage to confess that he is “lost.” The mind’s foundations have given way to childhood as supplying “something of the base,” where “something” withholds full disclosure. The poet’s education involves cherishing feeling while acknowledging mystery and the affirmative nature of being “lost.” Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” supplies a significant intertext, the lines, “O Lady! we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does nature live” (47-8) seeming to prompt a characteristic agreement and qualification in Wordsworth’s

passage. For Coleridge, what we “receive” is “what we give”; for Wordsworth, unless we “give,” we “never can receive.” It is as though Wordsworth points up the off-rhyming half-link between the two verbs to suggest that “receiving” is not simply an echo of “giving,” even as it is a precondition of it. Coleridge speaks collectively (“we”); Wordsworth addresses the collective (“Man”) as though it were a mysterious, even recalcitrant, “thou.”

As it proceeds to assert “the hiding-places of my power / Seem open” (336-7), the passage demonstrates how the present-tense of Romantic (and post-Romantic) poetry exercises unusual force. Before and after may be brought to mind, but chiefly as events or possibilities that happen in the virtual “now” of the poem; “Seem open” happens, so to speak, in the moment of utterance, a spell that works by clear-sighted acceptance of bewilderment. In the second book of *The Prelude* Wordsworth both admits, in Paul Magnuson’s words, “that recapturing precise origins in his own life is impossible” and goes on to supply “The construction of an origin in the poet’s relationship to its mother” (Magnuson, 221, 222). Magnuson’s brilliant reading posits, on Wordsworth’s part, a “succession of new fragmentary beginnings” (223). It brings out how, in the very form of the work, Wordsworth fulfils his education as a poet through utterances that reject certitude of explanation, conceding the need for “construction.”

Wordsworth’s scorn for reductive explanations of the mind’s capacities rhymes with his trust in language. Thus, interrupting his autobiographical poem to deny the possibility of true autobiography, Wordsworth writes: “Who knows the individual hour in which / His habits were first sown, even as a seed, / Who that shall point, as

with a wand, and say, / “This portion of the river of my mind / Came from yon fountain””? (ll. 211-15). “Hard task”, he goes on, echoing Milton (*Paradise Lost*, V. 564), “to analyse a soul, in which, / Not only general habits and desires, / But each most obvious and particular thought, / Not in a mystical and idle sense, / But in the words of reason deeply weighed, / Hath no beginning” (232-7). This meditation sounds neo-Platonic and empirically pragmatic at the same time. It passes, puzzlingly yet rapturously, into an account of the “infant Babe” (237) and a strikingly proto-modern account of infant development as the baby, bonding with the mother, is educated in “The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature, that connect him with the world” (263-4). There, in a good way, the reader may wish to assert, are Wordsworth’s two voices: one tenacious in its grip on “the filial bond,” a poetry full of “gravitation,” the other obstinately clinging to a conviction of the reality of infinity, of the mind as having “no beginning.”

Grounded in sense, longing for more, Wordsworth is the ancestor of the Yeats who, in “Among School Children,” wrote a major poem about education, under the rubric of the following desolating set of reflections: “Topic for poem – School children and the thought that life will waste them perhaps that no possible life can fulfil our dreams and even their teacher’s hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens” (qtd in O’Neill ed, *Yeats* 163; poetry cited from this edn). This prose draft for the poem is post-Romantic in its disillusion and irony. In the poem Yeats’s ottava rima undertakes a twisting, turning journey of thought and feeling, full of fluctuations of mood, incorporating the sardonic, the ironic, the tragic, and finally the affirmative. The sight of the school children leads Yeats into the labyrinth of what in “A General Introduction for My Work” (composed in 1937) he will call a

“phantasmagoria” (qtd O’Neill ed., *Yeats*, 30-1). In this state of passionate, self-dramatizing reverie Maud Gonne “stands before him as living child” (24) in an echo of Wordsworth’s “Lucy Gray” (see 58) and in it education serves only as a preparation for the wreckage of old age and unfulfilled dreams. Accordingly, the poet dismisses philosophical solutions to the questions of being and change as so many “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird” (48), the work of “a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” (32), to which he links himself.

In the final stanza, salvaging solace from the poem’s overall pessimism about the ends of education, Yeats shows his Wordsworthian inheritance by making his poem the place where the poet discovers what poetic education is or might be. He recasts the education to which the children are subject “In the best modern way” (7). His readers learn what he has had to learn and has taught, almost inadvertently, through his swirling meditation on the human attempt to escape temporality through ideas. Yeats, in Shelleyan fashion, has learned in suffering what he teaches in song (see *Julian and Maddalo*, 546):

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

(57-64)

The learning process is twofold: first, that all “images” (49) of desire are, in the end, “self-born mockers of man’s enterprise” (56) that is, images that are born from the self yet seem autonomous, that seek to imitate and yet deride “man’s enterprise” (for this reading, see, among others, Smith 87); second, that all poetic education has as its summation the longing intimated by and indeed enacted in this poem, that “Labour,” hard work, toil, the acquisition of knowledge and technique, bears fruit, is “blossoming or dancing” in a “where” that puts a momentary end to conflict and self-division, and cannot be interpreted in analytical terms: “How can we know ...” is not a protest against the limits of reason; it celebrates a mode of apprehension that defeats analytical decompositions. The “dancer from the dancer” identifies the poet’s life – his “dancing” with the “dance” of the achieved poem. It is a near-numinous moment that occurs in time (the dancer’s glance is “brightening”), but it seems, at least for a moment, to redeem time.

Poetic education enacting its commitment to process in the course of the poem is a Coleridgean as well as a Wordsworthian trait. So, too, is the near-inevitable movement from tracking the educative process to becoming consciously or subliminally a teacher of others. The lifelessly didactic lies in wait like a shadowy temptation, yet even as sages (and, as Matthew Gibson has argued, Coleridge became for Yeats a Romantic type of the sage), Wordsworth and Coleridge avoid mechanistic instruction. For Yeats, as Gibson puts it, “the impossible goal” was “a concrete spirituality, combining the spirituality of the saint with the concreteness of the artist” (Gibson 54). For Coleridge himself, the impossibility of perfect fusions – the

inability of a poem to provide other than temporary solutions – provides much of the impetus of his art. Zestfully balancing between ambition and elf-parody, he writes in 1797 of the poetic education necessary for the composition of an epic:

I should not think of devoting less than 20 years to an Epic Poem, Ten to collect materials and warm my mind with universal science. I would be a tolerable mathematician. I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine -- then the *mind of man* -- then the *minds of men* -- in all Travels, Voyages and Histories. So I would spend ten years -- the next five to the composition of the poem -- and the five last to the correction of it. So I would write haply not unhearing of that divine and rightly-whispering Voice, which speaks to mighty minds of predestinated Garlands, starry and unwithering. (Griggs ed. I. 320-1)

The task is clearly beyond the capacity of the author. Coleridge never did write an epic, not of the kind he envisaged at least, and in the end his poetry thrives as much on “accident and incoherence” (qtd in O’Neill ed. 30), in Yeats’s terms, as it does on the display of prodigious learning. In “The Eolian Harp” Cudworth, Plotinus and Priestley may sponsor his intuition of “one intellectual Breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all” (39-40) ; but more crucial to the poem’s success is its command of the associative flow licensed by the sub-genre of “Effusion” to which, on its initial publication in 1795, it signalled its attachment, a spirit of letting the poem’s breeze blow where it wishes. The poem manifests with what Keats will call “a greeting of the Spirit” (Cox ed. 181). It manages to connect and inhabit mind and world. It steps through the looking-glass of consciousness into a world where spirit and matter are



partners in an evolving dance, where “scents / Snatch’d from yon bean-field” (9-10) betokens what might be termed a sensuous mind as well as a “world *so* hush’d” (10).

The poem intuits a new, almost secret relationship with the real, one that flows out of a state of receptivity. The sinuous blank verse conveys and emblemizes this state; it is itself the medium and vehicle of a process, educating self, addressee, and reader.

Coleridge shows where a passage of blank verse might lead, as his lines unribbon their way from initial endearment to larger intuition. The poem supplies the kind of “education” suggested by meaning 3 of the *OED*, “The culture or development of personal knowledge or understanding, growth of character, moral and social qualities, etc., as contrasted with the imparting of knowledge or skill.” This meaning entangles itself with meaning 4c: “Instruction or enlightenment as imparted by a particular thing, circumstance, etc.; an educating force or experience, “ a meaning illustrated in the *OED* by a quotation from Rousseau’s *Emilius & Sophia* in William Kenrick’s 1762 translation : “The constitutional exertion of our organs and faculties is the education of nature.”

“The Eolian Harp” mimics the mazy pointlessness of free enquiry up to the final section, where a chastizing super-ego rises up and reproves the poet for “These shapings of the unregenerate mind, / Bubbles that rise and glitter as they break / On vain Philosophy’s aye-babbling spring” (47-9). Coleridge captures himself on the verge, or even in the thick, of the errors attendant on any approach through language to “Him, / Th’ INCOMPREHENSIBLE” (50-1). The poet learns that he is only securely authentic and free from blame “when with awe / I praise him, and with Faith that *inly* feels” (italics in original; 51-2). “Faith that *inly* feels” is a condition, it

would seem, attainable only when the poet writes antithetically, when, that is, he gives himself rope to hang himself theologically, even as he delights his audience imaginatively. Coleridge wrote in a copy of *Sibylline Leaves*, “I have some claim to the thanks of no small number of the readers of poetry in having first introduced this species of short blank verse poems – of which Southey, Lamb, Wordsworth, and others have since produced so many exquisite specimens” (qtd Halmi 17n).

Introducing what has come to be known as the “conversational poem,” partly way of refining possibilities bequeathed to him by Thomson, Akenside, and Cowper, Coleridge also created a genre in which the life of the poetic mind could be put to the fore – and thus the process of poetic education described in this essay.

Like later poems in the tradition of dramatized poetic “self-experience” (Halmi ed. 432) that Coleridge does so much to shape, “The Eolian Harp” balances all, brings all to mind, making of the single moment a lens on which to concentrate the rays of the poet’s best understanding of experience. In other conversational poems, Coleridge views the poem as a vehicle for making experience available to others and, in doing so, newly revelatory to the poet. Communing with as well as communicating to others, the poet discovers, as though for the first time, the nature of his poetic vocation consists. “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” imagines how Charles Lamb “Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood, / Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round / On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem / Less gross than bodily, a living thing / Which *acts* upon the mind” (italics in original; 38-42). There, the writing shadows Lamb’s experience with Coleridge’s own, inviting the reader to form a superimposed mental image of each man as simultaneously “Struck with deep joy” and standing “Silent with swimming sense” in two lines that open with strong

stresses, as if to slow down and solemnize. Poet and listener participate through the rhythms of the poem in a “living” dialogue which (in this version of the poem) itself “*acts upon the [reader’s] mind*” and enacts the workings of the poet’s.

In “Frost at Midnight” Coleridge returns to his own schooldays to recapture the emotion of hope and anticipation, an emotion that is transferred as an adult parent to his child:

For I was rear’d

In the great city, pent mid cloisters dim,  
 And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.  
 But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
 Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
 Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
 And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
 Of that eternal language, which thy God  
 Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
 Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
 Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
 Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (56-69)

The reciprocity that is Coleridge’s discovered ideal of teaching and learning is caught in the repetitions and back-flowings of syllable and phrase here. The blank verse is the mirror of a giving that is at the same time an asking. The poem avoids

sentimentality by allowing wish-fulfilment knowingly to infuse and begin to lose itself in perceptions of purpose. This blurring of hope and its actualization is prepared for by the way in which deprivation finds poetic recompense in the line, “And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars,” where “sky and stars” breathe freely in their unadjectival heaven. The repeated use of “shalt” or “shall” in the prophetic imaginings of his child’s oneness with nature sound like spells designed to tap into an “eternal language” which the poet both cannot reach and, impossibly, intimates that he might, briefly, possess. Again, in “The Nightingale” Coleridge offers a model for response to the natural, his poem balancing adroitly between opposites. On the one hand, the poem seeks not to “profane” (41) the natural; it will not project upon it the worn-out pathetic fallacies that associate the nightingale with “Philomela’s pity-pleading strains” (39). On the other, it allows its imaginings scope, seeking to practise what it preaches, entrance into an uncoercive relationship with nature. The poem is an exercise in poetic self-education, as it suggests that imagination can help us form a right relationship with the real.

It is part of the poem’s playful ease that Coleridge, while recommending a view of nature that sheds human self-regard, should refer, when he quotes “That strain again!” (90), to the extremely self-regarding Orsino from *Twelfth Night* (I. 1. 4). The moment suggests an alert awareness of the potential difficulties facing the poem’s other-centred programme. There is, too, a hint in the reference to the child’s “distressful mood (some inward pain / Had made up that strange thing, an infant’s dream)” (99-100) of a dimension that has to be bracketed for the poem to proceed: an innate, inexplicable distress that no amount of associations with joy will dispel. In this respect the poem anticipates its dark other, “Dejection: An Ode,” in which a “shaping

spirit of Imagination” (86) flares from the ashes of its own annulment through recognition of a joy from which the speaker is seemingly debarred.

“Education of error”: the Shelleyan phrase comes hauntingly to mind in consideration of the way in which poets of the period depict poetic education. A Romantic poem plunges into the unknown and the possibly erroneous as it seeks to find its way towards the provisionally truthful. Revealingly, Shelley emphasizes the existential nature of “education” in his fullest prose discussion of the topic, his Preface to *Laon and Cythna*. There, he asserts that “There is an education peculiarly fitted for a Poet, without which genius and sensibility can hardly fill the circle of their capacities” (133). This “education” involves first-hand experience of “Danger” (133) among sublime natural scenery, spectatorship of the “the more visible ravages of tyranny and war”, and enthusiasm for “Poetry in its most comprehensive sense” (134). Yet ultimately a poet’s education must find its reward and focus in “the power of awakening in others sensations like those which animate my own bosom” (134).

There are twinned forces at work in Shelley’s poetry: a wish to critique and undercut the errors of education, and the desire to affirm “the eternal truths charactered upon the imaginations of men” (*Defence of Poetry* 694). Often this second impulse involves, as in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” or “Ode to the West Wind,” the setting out of his feelings as though they might awaken in others a thirst – for Intellectual Beauty, say, or for the transformations of thought and feeling his words might provoke. In “Ode to the West Wind,” the poetry presents and performs the agonized drama of poetic education involved in being caught and wrung by the wind, of the poet as exemplary in his strivings and imperfections, and in his openness to a creative

energy that overwhelms yet is controlled by him, making possible his comparably metamorphic effect on others. Orpheus-like, he is assailed both by his creative energies and all that resists them in the process, until he cries, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” (54). The poem has left behind any ambition to tell us what to think, aligning itself with Shelley’s anti-doctrinal doctrine, in the Preface to the title poem, *Prometheus Unbound*, of the 1820 volume containing the Ode, that “Didactic poetry is my abhorrence” (232). In the Ode Shelley dramatizes the desire that the wind should “Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!” (66-7). The drive to disseminate, to share is strong, as the delayed placing of “Ashes and sparks” suggests: the reader that is, has to wait until after the line-ending for the twinned effects of the scattering to make themselves felt, as though to share in the effort and value of that scattering. There is a strong reluctance, too, as the constantly self-splitting yet self-renewing terza rima intimates, to halt the process of discovery, to turn process into product.

Imagination, then, for Shelley names the part of the reader he wishes to arouse, but he also grants the faculty its own unassailable autonomy. Hence in *Prometheus Unbound* he develops verbal orchestrations that associate a changed consciousness with a listening to music, the music enacted in the various choric lyrics and individualized yet identity-expanding speeches of which Act 4 is composed. That act is no excrescence, no mere decorative addition, but the quintessence of Shelleyan lyric drama, of the drama of his lyric drive. At the same time, a darker tale is told in Shelley’s work of a public deaf to his words: a deafness against which the elegiac sonorities of *Adonais* plead, doing so with such eloquence that transcendence of this world seems the poet’s most productive possibility. The poem, like the poet, is driven

“darkly, fearfully, afar” (492), engaged in a voyage that is also a flight and a quest, and that mimes an understanding of what it might mean to be and become a poet. *Adonais* educates itself in what a poem can, possibly must, be. It emerges from tradition (here embodied in the pastoral elegy) but moves beyond past work. It assaults and corrects the “error” of a contemporary culture that underestimated a genius like Keats. But it can only rely on its own self-generated cadences to guide it towards the hazardous forms of knowing and freedom that compose poetic education for this most self-aware of Romantic poets.

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